



Hannah wasn't sure which had awakened her — the brittle crackling sounds or the bright yellow flames.

She sat straight up in bed and stared in wide-eyed horror at the fire that surrounded her.

Flames rippled across her dresser. The burning wallpaper curled and then melted. The door of her closet had burned away, and she could see the fire leaping from shelf to shelf.

Even the mirror was on fire. Hannah could see her reflection, dark behind the wall of flickering flames.

The fire moved quickly to fill the room.

Hannah began to choke on the thick, sour smoke.

It was too late to scream.

But she screamed anyway.

How nice to find out it was only a dream.

Hannah sat up in bed, her heart pounding, her mouth as dry as cotton.

No crackling flames. No leaping swirls of yellow and orange.

No choking smoke.

All a dream, a horrible dream. So real.

But a dream.

“Wow. That was really scary,” Hannah muttered to herself. She sank back on her pillow and waited for her heart to stop thudding so hard in her chest. She raised her gray-blue eyes to the ceiling, staring at the cool whiteness of it.

Hannah could still picture the black, charred ceiling, the curling wallpaper, the flames tossing in front of the mirror.

“At least my dreams aren’t *boring!*” she told herself. Kicking off the light blanket, she glanced at her desk clock. Only eight-fifteen.

*How can it only be eight-fifteen?* she wondered. *I feel as if I’ve been sleeping forever. What day is it, anyway?*

It was hard to keep track of these summer days. One seemed to melt into another.

Hannah was having a lonely summer. Most of her friends had gone away on family vacations or to camp.

There was so little for a twelve-year-old to do in a small town like Greenwood Falls. She read a lot of books and watched a lot of TV and rode her bike around town, looking for someone to hang out with.

Boring.

But today Hannah climbed out of bed with a smile on her face.

She was alive!

Her house hadn't burned down. She hadn't been trapped inside the crackling wall of flames.

Hannah pulled on a pair of neon green shorts and a bright orange sleeveless top. Her parents were always teasing her about being color blind.

"Give me a *break*! What's the big deal if I like bright colors?" she always replied.

Bright colors. Like the flames around her bed.

"Hey, dream — get *lost*!" she muttered. She ran a hairbrush quickly through her short blond hair, then headed down the hall to the kitchen. She could smell the eggs and bacon frying on the stove.

"Good morning, everyone!" Hannah chirped happily.

She was even happy to see Bill and Herb, her six-year-old twin brothers.

Pests. The noisiest nuisances in Greenwood Falls.

They were tossing a blue rubber ball across the breakfast table. "How many times do I have to tell you — no ball-playing in the house?" Mrs. Fairchild called, turning away from the stove to scold them.

"A million," Bill said.

Herb laughed. He thought Bill was hilarious. They both thought they were a riot.

Hannah stepped behind her mother and wrapped her up in a tight hug around the waist.

“Hannah — stop!” her mother cried. “I nearly knocked over the eggs!”

“*Hannah — stop! Hannah — stop!*” The twins imitated their mother.

The ball bounced off Herb’s plate, rebounded off the wall, and flew onto the stove, inches from the frying pan.

“Nice shot, ace,” Hannah teased.

The twins laughed their high-pitched laughs.

Mrs. Fairchild spun around, frowning. “If the ball goes in the frying pan, you’re going to *eat* it with your eggs!” she threatened, shaking her fork at them.

This made the boys laugh even harder.

“They’re in goofy moods today,” Hannah said, smiling. She had a dimple in one cheek when she smiled.

“When are they ever in *serious* moods?” her mother demanded, tossing the ball into the hallway.

“Well, I’m in a *great* mood today!” Hannah declared, gazing out the window at a cloudless, blue sky.

Her mother stared at her suspiciously. “How come?”

Hannah shrugged. “I just am.” She didn’t feel like telling her mother about the nightmare, about how good it felt just to be alive. “Where’s Dad?”

“Went to work early,” Mrs. Fairchild said, turning the bacon with the fork. “Some of us don’t get the entire summer off,” she added. “What are you going to do today, Hannah?”

Hannah opened the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of orange juice. “The usual, I guess. You know. Just hang out.”

“I’m sorry you’re having such a boring summer,” her mother said, sighing. “We just didn’t have the money to send you to camp. Maybe next summer —”

“That’s okay, Mom,” Hannah replied brightly. “I’m having an okay summer. Really.” She turned to the twins. “How’d you guys like those ghost stories last night?”

“Not scary,” Herb quickly replied.

“Not scary at all. Your ghost stories are dumb,” Bill added.

“You guys looked pretty scared to me,” Hannah insisted.

“We were pretending,” Herb said.

She held up the orange juice carton. “Want some?”

“Does it have pulp in it?” Herb asked.

Hannah pretended to read the carton. “Yes. It says ‘one hundred percent pulp.’”

“I hate pulp!” Herb declared.

“Me, too!” Bill agreed, making a face.

It wasn’t the first time they’d had a breakfast discussion about pulp.

“Can’t you buy orange juice without pulp?” Bill asked their mother.

“Can you strain it for us?” Herb asked Hannah.

“Can I have apple juice instead?” Bill asked.

“I don’t want juice. I want milk,” Herb decided.

Normally, this discussion would have made Hannah scream. But today, she reacted calmly. “One apple juice and one milk coming up,” she said cheerfully.

“You certainly *are* in a good mood this morning,” her mother commented.

Hannah handed Bill his apple juice, and he promptly spilled it.

After breakfast, Hannah helped her mother clean up the kitchen. “Nice day,” Mrs. Fairchild said, peering out the window. “Not a cloud in the sky. It’s supposed to go up to ninety.”

Hannah laughed. Her mother was always giving weather reports. “Maybe I’ll go for a long bike ride before it gets really hot,” she told her mother.

She stepped out the back door and took a deep breath. The warm air smelled sweet and fresh. She watched two yellow-and-red butterflies fluttering side by side over the flower garden.

She took a few steps across the grass toward the garage. From somewhere down the block she could hear the low drone of a power mower.

Hannah gazed up at the clear blue sky. The sun felt warm on her face.

“Hey — *look out!*” an alarmed voice cried.

Hannah felt a sharp pain in her back.

She uttered a frightened gasp as she fell to the ground.